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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000222

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: THREE MONTHS BEFORE LOCAL ELECTIONS -
OPPOSITION IN DISARRAY, UNM STRONG

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN R. BASS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Recent internal United National Movement (UNM) polling shows officially-undeclared mayoral candidate Gigi Ugulava with a commanding lead over opposition rivals. The trend lines indicate that Ugulava's active grassroots outreach has paid significant dividends while opposition inaction, notably by chief rival Irakli Alasania (Alliance/Our Georgia - Free Democrats), has eroded their support and widened the gap in the UNM's favor. Former PM Zurab Noghaidei's decision to court Moscow has further split the non-parliamentary opposition and reinforced its focus on fruitless backroom dealings and internal squabbling rather than campaigning. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Diligent, focused efforts by the UNM appear likely to pay electoral dividends while the non-parliamentary opposition is turning what should have been a solid electoral opportunity into a likely failure. Long-simmering fissures among the non-parliamentary opposition have grown into public disagreements. Noghaidei's controversial move to embrace Russia has split the non-parliamentary opposition on ideological grounds, but personality and financial incentives still play the dominant role behind the scenes. On the other hand, the disorganization/reorganization among the non-parliamentary opposition only strengthens UNM's dominant electoral position. Sadly but perhaps predictably, the non-parliamentary opposition once again appears unable to learn from past failures. Meanwhile, UNM has coalesced around Ugulava who is energized, and ironically, showing his rivals that one does not need to spend vast sums of money to make a discernible impact. End Comment.

UNM Strong, Facing Unlikely Opposition Problem

¶3. (C) The UNM's American pollster (please protect) shared with the Ambassador polling for the UNM that shows currently undeclared UNM candidate Gigi Ugulava with a commanding lead. Ugulava's raw numbers put his support at near 50 percent; with allocations of undecideds, Ugulava is likely to grab 60 percent of the vote. Alasania runs a distant second, winning just over 10 percent of the vote. The rest of the vote is scattered among many marginal candidates. Ugulava's numbers have been trending dramatically upwards in the last six months, while Alasania's numbers trended downwards. Polling and focus groups indicate the numbers reflect Ugulava's engagement versus Alasania's inaction. Alasania has done little visible campaigning in Tbilisi since announcing his candidacy months ago and spent much of December and January traveling abroad in Europe and the U.S.. Ugulava continues to work hard; he told the Ambassador he spends a chunk of each day meetings with 3-4 groups of citizens in their neighborhoods, fielding complaints and requests. The current numbers have created a dilemma the UNM did not expect -- how to prepare to handle what is shaping up to be a resounding victory, yet still ensure widespread public confidence in the results. The Pollster noted that, ironically, what the UNM

needed was a semi-coherent opposition, but there was little indication that the non-parliamentary opposition could coalesce around any one leader.

Noghaideli Flirts with Moscow - Other "Democrats" Follow

14. (C) Although there have always been obvious fissures in the non-parliamentary opposition, former Prime Minister Noghaideli's embrace of a pro-Russian strategy appears to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Privately, the general view of the UNM, CDM, Alliance and other more moderate political actors is that Noghaideli is a "feckless idiot", a "useful idiot for UNM", a "shameless clown" and so on. An increasingly moderate Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) told the Ambassador that Noghaideli was so unpopular and such a perfect foil, she almost believed that he was acting on behalf of the UNM. Alasania told the Ambassador that he has heard that Noghaideli has discussed nothing of any importance with Russian authorities and was "selected" simply because he was in Moscow when Putin thought it would be useful to openly interfere in Georgian domestic politics. Noghaideli told the DCM that he was pursuing a logical course by speaking to Russian officials noting that Saakashvili's decision to ignore Russia was a failed policy. Noghaideli said he was surprised at the high level at which he had been received in Moscow, and noted that he only had signed a framework agreement with United Russia and not discussed thorny bilateral issues. Noghaideli maintained that he was simply trying to foster communication with Russian authorities (and in time South Ossetian and Abkhaz) to try to find workable solutions to re-incorporate South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia.

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15. (C) Whatever Noghaideli's motives, at present he stands to capture only a small portion of the Georgian electorate which is potentially open to closer relations with the Kremlin. IRI and NDI polling on Georgian views as to who is to blame for the 2008 August War; whether or not Russian aggression continues; and whether or not Russia is a partner or enemy suggest that only 5-10 percent of the electorate would be receptive to a pro-Russian policy. Noghaideli dismissed the argument saying that polls show generally that Georgians have anti-Russia feelings, but the reality was Georgian views were more complex and the public generally supported his initiatives because Georgians realized that "somebody had to speak to Moscow." Despite Noghaideli's optimism, it appears unlikely that Noghaideli has any chance to leverage his northern turn into electoral support especially considering that former "pro-Western democrats" such as Zviad Dzidziguri (Conservatives), Koba Davitashvili (People's Party) and even former Speaker Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement - United Georgia) have also thrown their hats into the "support for dialogue with Russia" ring.

AWOLasania

16. (C) According to recent IRI and NDI polling, Alasania's personal numbers remain high. However, he is a distant second to current Tbilisi mayor Gigi Ugulava when viewed through the prism of the mayoral election. Alasania's downward trend lines appear to be a troubling sign for his candidacy. Internal UNM polling now shows Alasania winning only a shade above 10 percent for the Tbilisi mayoral race, nearly half of the support he enjoyed two months ago. Alasania faces two difficult political tasks: to turn his personal approval ratings into solid political support; and to pivot from detached, foreign-policy focused diplomat into a credible mayoral candidate who is able to articulate a coherent plan as to how he would run the city. So far, Alasania has been unable to do either. Notwithstanding a difficult broadcast media environment and significant financial disadvantage, Alasania has not focused on the low-cost activities he could use to generate support. He

spends a large share of his time outside of Georgia. When in Tbilisi, Alasania rarely if ever spends time among the public or does any sort of retail level campaigning. In contrast, Ugulava is found in all corners of the city, meeting residents, listening to their concerns and explaining his plans for improving the city and their lives. Alasania has pushed back the re-launch of his campaign a number of times, and has effectively ceded three months of unopposed campaign time to Ugulava. Unfortunately for Alasania, his absence has left the public with little understanding of his platform or why he is running. Alasania has hired the American firm Aristotle consultants as advisors and plans to begin his campaign in earnest shortly. Alasania's advisors maintain that he has plenty of time to take on Ugulava successfully.

Levan and the Money Trail

17. (C) Levan Gachechiladze (Protect Georgia Movement) has apparently not made up his mind as to what he intends to do regarding the May 2010 elections. MP Paata Davitaia (We Ourselves), with whom Gachechiladze had a good relationship, told us that Gachechiladze also thought that a pro-Russia policy swing could potentially be a good idea for the non-parliamentary opposition. Davitaia expressed his disgust with Gachechiladze's willingness to embrace Noghaideli's position. Davitaia said that others willing to join Noghaideli (Conservatives - People's Party) were doing so for the modest sum of about USD 50,000. According to Davitaia and other sources, Gachechiladze has been mulling a run for mayor as the candidate of the United Opposition. Gachechiladze's entry into the race would certainly complicate Alasania's floundering bid. Privately, Alasania's team has repeatedly told Poloff that Gachechiladze has assured them that he supports Alasania, but would only announce his support publicly at a "key moment". Nevertheless, Alasania insiders question Gachechiladze's commitment, noting that he could be "purchased" at any moment, and the Alliance simply does not have the funds nor inclination to meet what could be a substantial asking price.

Christian Democrat's Candidate Underwhelms

18. (C) Former President of the Georgian International Oil Corporation (which oversaw the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project in Georgia) Gia Chanturia was officially announced as the CDM candidate for mayor on February 12. Chanturia left Georgia amid controversy and allegations of corruption after being dismissed from his post by President Saakashvili in

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September 2004. Since that time Chanturia has lived in Baku, and advised the Azeri government and SOCAR on oil and gas projects. He continues to have good ties with government officials in Azerbaijan. Chanturia's initial speech as the CDM mayoral candidate was lackluster, and he left the party's anniversary party mid-way through the event. Chanturia admitted to an Embassy contact that he had no real interest in running for mayor, but had been encouraged by the GoG to run. If he ran, Chanturia was reportedly told that the GoG would support an energy project he hopes to develop on the Black Sea that involves refining and transit of CNG/LNG. (Embassy Note: Press is already speculating about the "real" reasons for Chanturia's return to politics. End Note.)

19. (C) Christian Democratic Leader, Giorgi Targamadze told Poloff that Chanturia's technocratic background and his ability to fund his own campaign were both appealing to CDM. By backing Chanturia, who is running as an independent, Targamadze opens himself up to criticism of being a GoG stooge. However, as Targamadze told Poloff, CDM has little to no chance of winning the Tbilisi mayoral race and was committed to playing to its strengths by focusing on local council (Sakrebulo) elections nationwide. Chanturia appears to provide the best of limited options; a self-funded

candidate who will keep CDM relevant in Tbilisi but whose loss would do little to harm Targamadze personally or CDM's brand. By backing Chanturia, CDM can focus on down ticket races; maintain its support (roughly 10 percent) in Tbilisi; and give its organization a good electoral test run. Whatever Chanturia's merits, Targamadze clearly views the electoral utility of running Chanturia as worth the risk.

BASS